

Marianne Thamm on the crucial role of whistleblowers and investigative journalists in defeating corruption

 By [Leigh Andrews](#)

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On Wednesday, 10 April 2019 I snatched up the rare opportunity to spend most of my lunch hour with Marianne Thamm, the incredibly smart, candid natural storyteller who has witnessed the harshest violence as an investigative journalist, as well as the hope, resilience and fortitude of South Africa. Here's what you missed.



Image of Marianne Thamm via [Daily Maverick](#)

Many of us have read Thamm's work, as she's been employed as a journalist for over 30 years now, though she quipped at the Red & Yellow School's most recent lecture: "It was journalism that chose me – I'd have preferred to be a plumber." We're lucky journalism chose her, because if you Google 'investigative journalism in South Africa' and Thamm's name will be one of the top results.

Most recently, her name shone as one of the most recent Standard Bank Sikuvile Journalism Award winners for her contribution to the country's society and democracy through the Gupta Leaks articles.



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As these were based on over a hundred thousand emails, they required sophisticated database analysis skills to explore them fully – that's a prime example of a recent collaboration between several newsrooms, with the *Daily Maverick*, *Amabhungane* and *News24* journalists working together.

Thamm contrasted that to when she worked in the art department of the local media before the South Africa we now know. It appealed to her because what wasn't being said by the media was being said on stage, as art became the place to challenge authority.

It's not easy work, but it's necessary

Shifting focus back to the current context, Thamm says while it's not easy work, it's necessary, as it's all about exposing the truth in an era where there's more 'fake news' than ever before.



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Thamm shared the importance of corruption-stories through the years – just think of the impact of the Watergate scandal, largely confined to the US in the 1970s. Thamm calls this proof that “Fake news and bulls#it has been around forever.”

Luckily, we're now in a more liberal, connected space than ever before and there's a concerted effort to bring those responsible for mocking the basis of Freedom Charter to account. Bell Pottinger was a case in point in this regard.



Pay back the money Bell Pottinger

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Unfortunately, Thamm says this was just one example of the constant attempt to manipulate the world's emotions while corruption continues behind the scenes, often at the top level. From Bosasa to Steinhoff to the Guptas, there's so much corruption and such big numbers are bandied about that most of us simply don't understand what's going on.

Fighting the good fight

The good news is that we have a free press and dedicated journalists working on exposing the truth. Their strength is to sniff out the right people to speak to and access the documents that reveal the reality.

“ Thamm says nothing she has written has ever not been published, and as TV viewers, we can watch anything we like. In addition, the whole tone and tenure of parliament has changed, where we can stand up and chant “Pay back the money”. We are often at each other's throats but civil society rallies for a good cause. Don't take these extraordinary freedoms for granted. ”

That said, Thamm explains that she stepped away from the traditional news model in 2007 as she describes herself as feral, finding it hard to work in a corporate space. That's why she enjoys the *Daily Maverick*'s 'dark basement' feel, with its dedicated team determined to fight the good fight.

Without a free media, fake news would not be exposed and the *Daily Maverick* is a huge proponent of that. Thamm says it's an organic, light-on-its-feet organisation that's beholden to nobody but its readers – it's a funding model that stands out because its 1.8m unique users keep the publication alive.



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Those patriotic readers are part of a larger society based on civic nationalism, with the will to lead towards positive change together.

Thamm concluded that there's nothing wrong with individualism unless that means you don't also see yourself as part of a greater community. She acknowledges that we're at a dangerous point in our young democratic history, but she's optimistic and says what happens after the elections on 8 May will be the beginning of something new.

Thamm says to celebrate the freedoms we now enjoy, the systems that work and the whistle-blowers who have exposed corruption, often at vast personal expense.



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Let's stand with Thamm to continue the struggle for a decent world.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.

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